



**FILO:UBA**  
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras  
Universidad de Buenos Aires

A

# Commanding and Obeying

Autor:

**Jasper Doomen**

Revista:

**Patristica et Mediævalia**

**2012, 33, 3-15**



Artículo



**FILO:UBA**  
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

FILODIGITAL  
Repositorio Institucional de la Facultad  
de Filosofía y Letras, UBA

## COMMANDING AND OBEYING

JASPER DOOMEN

An appeal to 'good' and 'bad' actions in religions is evident. Stealing, e.g., is considered to be wrong, whereas giving to the poor is prescribed as good. In this article, I will examine to what extent it may be maintained that such moral elements are indeed inherent in divine commands or exhortations; I will focus on the Christian faith. In section 1, two positions are outlined. Those who indicate some things to be good or bad as such, irrespective of God's ruling, and the thinkers who emphasize God's radical power and who state that God decides these matters, thus arguing a radical omnipotence, are juxtaposed, although their positions may not differ greatly from an ethical (or meta-ethical) viewpoint.

Section 2 is focused on the consequences of these alternative outlooks. If there are such things as good and bad actions, it is important to find out why these are respectively prescribed and abhorred (subsection 2.1). A number of Biblical passages may illustrate the reasons to display a certain behavior. Subsection 2.2 briefly explores the second perspective stated in section 1.

Section 3 presents an alternative; the goal is to be as critical as possible in analyzing the reasons to adhere to the commands one is to obey. In particular, it is inquired which role selfishness plays; is an act of altruism possible? I have not limited the research to religion here, but have tried to find a broader scope. In section 4, some relevant remaining meta-ethical questions are dealt with. Some Christian philosophers have, e.g., appealed to intuitions in order to account for the existence of goodness.

In this article, I attempt to approach matters with an open view, not dismissing any position *a priori*. This should lead to a consistent whole and to credible results.

### **1. The nature of 'goodness' from a religious perspective**

The main question addressed in this article, whether moral acts can be performed within a religious scope, raises the subsequent one on what basis goodness can be acknowledged to exist. Whether this can exist at all is a more fundamental question, which will be dealt with later, although it is connected with the issue of the source of goodness, which is the subject-matter of this section.

In Christian philosophy, two positions can rudimentarily be distinguished. On the one hand, it is stated that goodness exists as such, God's commands reflecting this. On the other hand, it is deemed to be at God's disposal to determine which acts are good and which aren't, rendering goodness contingent in this respect. (The issue already, *in nuce*, receives attention from Plato; in an early work, the question is put forward whether something is approved of by the gods because it is pious, or, conversely, pious because they approve of it<sup>1</sup>.) Of course, middle positions are also possible and have even been defended, but as this is of minor relevance to this article, I will merely deal with the two options mentioned.

Bonaventura's line of thought is an example of the first position. He limits God's power by stating:

"God is omnipotent, but in such a way that no *culpable* acts are attributed to Him, such as lying and wanting evil." ("[...] Deus est omnipotens, ita tamen, quod ei non attribuuntur actus *culpabiles*, utpote mentiri et malle velle [...].")<sup>2</sup>; "God's will is so *right* that it can in no way stray." ("[Voluntas Dei] sic est *recta*, ut nullo modo potest obliquari [...].")<sup>3</sup>.

A (or the) right way to act is presupposed here, independent of God's decisions. Further,

"The divine omnipotence, through everything, is irreprehensible, since it only *prescribes, prohibits, or suggests* justly; it merely *acts* in a good way, and *permits* nothing unjustly." ("[Divina omnipotentia] per omnia est irreprehensibilis, quia nihil nisi iuste *praecipit, prohibet, vel consulit*; nihil *agit* nisi bene, nihil *permittit* iniuste")<sup>4</sup>.

This presupposes a (or the) just way to proceed, again independent of God's decisions. In a similar vein, Thomas Aquinas indicates some acts to be good or bad by their kind. ("[...] quidam actus sunt boni ex genere [...]. Quidam vero sunt actus mali ex genere [...].")<sup>5</sup>.

Even Damiani, famous for his emphasis on God's omnipotence<sup>6</sup>, maintains that God can't perform an evil act:

"It is clear that God is unable to do something bad, just as He is ignorant in this regard. For He is unable to lie, or commit perjury, or do something unjust, nor does He know how to." ("[...] videlicet quicquid malum est, sicut non [Deus] potest agere, ita nescit agere. Non enim potest aut scit mentiri, vel peiurare, vel iniustum aliquid facere")<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a.

<sup>2</sup> Bonaventura, *Breviloquium*, pars 1, cap. 7 (p. 215). In each instance where I have translated a section myself, I have included the original texts. The spelling of the original texts in English and French has been preserved, even if this conflicts with the present spelling.

<sup>3</sup> Bonaventura, *Op. cit.*, pars 1, cap. 9 (p. 217).

<sup>4</sup> Bonaventura, *Op. cit.*, pars 1, cap. 9 (p. 218).

<sup>5</sup> Th. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 92, art. 2 (p. 161).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., P. Damiani, *De Divina Omnipotentia*, 612 A, B (p. 448/449).

<sup>7</sup> P. Damiani, *Op. cit.*, 597 C (pp. 390/391, 392/393) (cf. 600 A (p. 400/401), 610 D (p. 442/443)).

It would not contribute to God's power to engage in such actions, so His being unable to perform them does not conflict with His omnipotence. From Damiani's presentation it appears that his view is similar to Bonaventura's with regard to the existence of goodness (and evil). Leibniz presents an additional argument:

"I am far removed from the opinion of those who maintain that there are absolutely no rules concerning goodness or perfection in the nature of things or in the ideas that God has of them, and that the works of God are merely good because of this formal reason that God has made them. For if that were the case, God, knowing that He is their creator, would only have to observe them afterwards, and deem them good. [...] Furthermore, by saying that things aren't good by any standard of goodness, but by God's will only, one destroys, it seems to me, without thinking, the entire love of God and His entire glory." ("[...] je suis fort éloigné du sentiment de ceux qui soutiennent qu'il n'y a point de regles de bonté et de perfection dans la nature des choses ou dans les idées que Dieu en a, et que les ouvrages de Dieu ne sont bons que par cette raison formelle que Dieu les a faits. Car si cela estoit, Dieu sachant qu'il en est l'auteur, n'avoit que faire de les regarder par après, et de les trouver bons [...]. Aussi, disant que les choses ne sont bonnes par aucune regle de bonté, mais par la seule volonté de Dieu, on détruit, ce me semble, sans y penser, tout l'amour de Dieu, et toute sa gloire")<sup>8</sup>.

Leibniz, then, emphasizes the content of goodness and on that ground wants to cling to an absolute standard by which God abides.

By contrast, one may argue that God's power is not limited in this respect, nor should it be, God Himself determining what it is for something to be good at all. Biel states, e.g., that it follows from God's omnipotence that He can command someone to lie without this resulting in a sin<sup>9</sup>. Accordingly, that it is forbidden to lie – "Neither shalt thou bear false witness against thy neighbor." (Deuteronomy 5:20) – is a random given. God decides completely unhindered what 'good' and 'bad' mean. This is also Descartes' view:

"[...] there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on God. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good. If this were not so, then [...] God would not have been completely indifferent with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create. If some reason for something's being good had existed prior to his preordination, this would have determined God to prefer those things which it was best to do. But on the contrary, just because he resolved to prefer those things which are now to be done, for this very reason, in the words of Genesis, 'they are very good'; in other words, the reason for their goodness depends on the fact that he exercised his will to make them so"<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> G. Leibniz, *Discours de Metaphysique*, § 2 (p. 1532).

<sup>9</sup> G. Biel, *Collectorium circa Quattuor Libros Sententiarum*, Book 3, Distinctio 38, Quaestio unica (Art. 2, Concl. 2), G. (pp. 649, 650).

<sup>10</sup> R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sixth Set of Replies, p. 294.

It is difficult to assess the merits of these positions with regard to their claims about God's options and (possible) limitations. This would require a more intricate metaphysical theory than I would pretend to be able to proffer here; moreover, these thinkers do not, perhaps with the exception of Leibniz, really produce arguments why their position should be correct and, even if they had done so, in the absence of a covering, or – as is pertinent to this issue – God's eye view, the matter can't be resolved with a metaphysical analysis.

It is, however, possible to evaluate the positions from a meta-ethical point of view<sup>11</sup>. According to the first approach, good and bad exist as absolute standards<sup>12</sup>. An account is needed why it is good to, e.g., give alms to the poor, or bad to lie. In the next section, a number of Biblical sections will be explored in order to find out whether an answer to this question can be found there. According to the second approach, in which God determines what 'good' and 'bad' actions are, an external criterion to obey Him is not available as it is supposed to be in the first approach, so the question why this should be done presents itself here, too.

## 2. The two options explored

In this section, I will try to establish the tenability of the two positions outlined in the previous section. Firstly, I will, in subsection 2.1, evaluate the claims of those who argue that goodness as such exists from a religious (mainly Christian) point of view, and that it may provide a basis for acting. Secondly, the basis of God's position as a fundamental lawgiver, to which the defenders of the second position adhere, will be investigated in subsection 2.2. Admittedly, the Bible – presumably having been written in an accessible style – doesn't convey a philosophical message<sup>13</sup>, but that doesn't mean that the texts should not be analyzed critically.

### 2.1. *The basic 'goodness' as a motivational element*

There are a number of Biblical passages in which 'good' deeds are prescribed and 'bad' ones are forbidden. I will argue that the basis for complying with the norms according to which one is to behave and abstaining from those one is to avoid has a different basis than an acknowledgement of their being 'correct' (or 'right') respectively 'wrong'.

<sup>11</sup> Meta-ethics deals with the basic notions in ethics, e.g., what 'good' and 'bad' mean (if anything). The next sections will present a more elaborate account than this one.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is argued that evil things are nothing, as they don't proceed from God (P. Damiani, *Op. cit.*, 609 B (p. 436), 610 C, D (p. 442)), and that evil is to be considered an absence of goodness (e.g., Anselm, *De Conceptu Virginali et De Originali Peccato*, Cap. 5 (p. 146)); cf. Augustine, *De Natura Boni*, XVII, 17 (p. 454/455).

<sup>13</sup> B. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Cap. 13 (p. 167).

The revelation of the Ten Commandments is an obvious place to start. These are presented as the fundamental directives God imposes upon man. According to the first option, there would be something inherently 'good' in obeying these commandments, or inherently 'wrong' in disobeying them. It is clear that adhering to most, or possibly all of them would contribute to a stable society. The interdiction to murder (Deuteronomy 5:17), e.g., will, if observed, lead to a peaceful society in which people can prosper. It is, however, difficult to support the claim that the Commandments are supposed to represent moral values.

Some of the Commandments are not motivated but simply postulated; they can't be helpful to this inquiry. In the case of blasphemy, conversely, a reason is given. This consists in the fact that "[...] the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain." (Deuteronomy 5:11). In this case, then, the (concealed) penalty which is to be bestowed upon the blasphemer is the basis for keeping to the norm. Similar accounts are given in Deuteronomy 28:15-68, where the curses for disobedience are described.

In the New Testament, the negative effects of failing to comply are, on the whole, less pungent than in the Hebrew Bible and are presented more subtly. Still, the basis analysis is the same. Matthew 7:1-2 reads: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again". The second verse gives the explanation – one shouldn't judge because of the negative effects for oneself – but even the first verse points to this: there is a necessary connection between the imperative and the consequence by the use of the conjunction 'that' ('hina')<sup>14</sup>. It is hard, then, to evade the conclusion that self-interest is the motivation to comply. This is also the way the 'golden rule'<sup>15</sup> is to be interpreted<sup>16</sup>.

There are also passages in which the negative element is stressed – e.g., Matthew 26:52 ("[...] all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.") – but the analysis is the same here: don't partake in 'bad' or 'wrong' actions because they will reflect on you<sup>17</sup>.

The positive elements, i.e., those which point to rewards, evince the same analysis as the penal ones outlined above. To commence again with the Ten Commandments, the Fifth is "Honor thy father and thy mother, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." (Deuteronomy 5:16). In this case, the reason for keeping to the Commandment appears to be that a reward will follow. No intrinsic reason is given<sup>18, 19</sup> (which may be impossible at any rate, but that

<sup>14</sup> This Gospel is possibly a translation of an Aramaic or Hebrew text which is lost.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 7:12: "[...] all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

<sup>16</sup> Cf. R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., e.g., Sura 16:104-111.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., e.g., Sura 43:74, Sura 44:51-57.

<sup>19</sup> Hinduism, in which reincarnation into a new body by the soul after one has died

will be dealt with further on).

The general motivation is presented in Deuteronomy 29:9: “Keep [...] the words of this covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do”<sup>20</sup>. The reward for believing and acting as God commands lies in being saved (e.g., Matthew 6:1-6, 7:21, 21:21-22; Romans 10:9)<sup>21</sup>. It is stated in Luke 6:35: “[...] love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again [...]”. This seems not to appeal to any positive results for the actor. Still, the passage continues “[...] and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil”. As the conjunction connecting the sections is a neutral one in this case (‘kai’ (‘and’)), not introducing a final clause (as in the case of Matthew 7:1 mentioned above), one might argue that there is no necessary link with the agreeable consequences. It would be difficult, however, to find another reason than this for someone to be so kind to his enemies as is prescribed. One would have to appeal to some sort of ‘goodness’ or altruism, both of which are problematic, as will be pointed out in sections 3 and 4, respectively. First, the second possibility, ‘good’ actions being such as a result of God’s decree, needs to be examined.

## 2.2. *God as the basic legislator*

The interpretation of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ actions of the previous subsection amounts to the conclusion that the basis for acting or refraining lies in the penalty or reward which may result from it. The question is whether the second position, according to which God decides what it means for something to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’, may provide another analysis.

A basic given is God’s power to both reward and punish (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)<sup>22</sup>. God’s power is continuously implicit in this interpretation; if the Ten Commandments do not attest to values which are good as such (as in the first interpretation), their enforcement is an all the more pressing issue. It is, then, incumbent on man to fear God (Deuteronomy 6:2, 10:12-13; Matthew 10:28). One may argue that Abraham, when commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:2-10), intended to do so on the following basis: “Why [...] does Abraham do it? For God’s sake and – the two are wholly identical – for his own sake. He does it for God’s sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can

---

is a central tenet, and the concept of God (if one may qualify it as such) differs greatly from that of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, proffers a different explanation from a metaphysical point of view, but it may be argued that the way one’s deeds in life (Karma) are the basis for one’s misery or fortune (or, rather, in Hinduism, the degree of misery), and one’s attempt to reach ‘Moksha’ (the release from life) can be qualified in the same way from a meta-ethical point of view.

<sup>20</sup> Cf., e.g., Deuteronomy 8:1.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Sura 19:60-61.

<sup>22</sup> Cf., e.g., Sura 3:189, Sura 5:40.

prove it"<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, it is the fear of God that is presented by God as the crucial reason: "And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." (Genesis 22:12). Finally, even the man at the cross beside Christ who showed remorse<sup>24</sup> refers to the *fear* of God (Luke 23:40-42).

The problem is evident: if the reason one is to obey God lies in His position as a legislator (and final judge), there doesn't seem to be a moral criterion. It is simply God's power, and not His or another goodness, which is decisive<sup>25</sup>. His authority would be analogous to that of the human legislator. This is an important given which is to be explored in section 3.

### 3.1. Selfishness as the pivotal element

Now that the two positions have been explored, it is time to evaluate them, as will be done in this subsection and the next. The problem with the first position appears to be that no explanation is given *why* something is good. The Bible mentions the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17, 3:5), but this isn't explicated. One might try to appeal to a common sense-approach, which may have been discounted in the places referred to in subsection 2.1. The fact that the consequences for the actor are mentioned should then be ignored, but it is worthwhile to inquire whether this may be a viable option.

It seems obvious that, e.g., it is a good thing to give to the poor and a bad thing to commit murder. If the reasons why one acts or abstains are investigated, however, the issue may turn out to be more intricate than it seems to be at first. In this case, the self-interest I made explicit in the previous section (where, e.g., the rewards given by God are decisive) is not at stake, as I already indicated not to focus on it for now.

A first option is that one simply gives to the poor because one may at some point in the future be poor oneself; for that reason, one wants others to remember one's deed so that they (themselves having acquired enough means in the meantime) will reciprocate, perhaps for the same reason one oneself gave in the first place. The act then becomes one of insurance, really; one isn't sure whether one will fall on bad times, but should such a situation arise, it is nice to know there is a chance one won't be deprived of the basic<sup>26</sup> needs. The situation is, of course, optimal if one

<sup>23</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 59, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 27:38-44 and Mark 15:27-32 report that neither of the two men who were crucified together with Christ repented.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mackie's observation that resorting to the position that God's commands supply the prescriptive element in morality undermines morality itself (J. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, p. 256).

<sup>26</sup> One may debate which needs are 'basic'; I won't deal with that in this article as it is not a crucial issue here.



doesn't have to rely on the other party's willingness to return the favor or contributing for another reason and one lives in a society with a relatively stable system of distribution.

Such a system of distribution has been implemented and expanded in the developed countries<sup>27</sup>. In this case, one merely contributes (e.g., through taxes) because of the safety-net which is provided for oneself. (There are those who are rich enough not to have to worry and whose position might only be in danger in case of an emergency, but they don't have the option not to contribute. They simply pay because their voice isn't strong enough or, put differently, their view isn't represented to a great enough extent in the political process).

A second option consists in giving to someone one cares about, like a friend<sup>28</sup>. Is self-interest at stake here? The difficulty lies in the qualification of 'self. I won't expound a discourse here that would diverge too much from the current theme, but the question whether one considers a friend (or, e.g., one's wife, or a family member) as exhibiting a special position is a relevant one. The sort of relation there is to another person seems, in many cases, to matter to one's attitude towards him or her. One may argue, then, that in this case self-interest is displayed, albeit not self-interest in the sense that only the actor is at stake (abandoning his friend, wife or family member if that should prove to be most advantageous) but in the sense that one is connected to another person and *on that basis* wants him or her to prosper.

This does, of course, call for a division within the notion of 'self-interest'; this variant may be dubbed 'indirect self-interest' rather than direct self-interest (by 'direct self-interest' I understand the self-interest which is at stake when one intends to serve one's own needs)<sup>29</sup>. After all, the action isn't directed at a random person but just at someone whose interest one wants to promote. In other words, it is in one's (indirect) self-interest that the (direct) self-interest of the other party is served. This even extends to dying for one's friends (John 15:13), which means that one considers one's indirect self-interest more important than one's direct self-interest. Of course, it is conceivable that someone (aspires to) include everyone in his or her circle of intimates, but this is immaterial to the analysis: it merely means that many beings are involved; the motivation is no different than in cases in which a small number of beings are at stake.

A third option is to focus on the situation rather than on the quality of the relation. One may experience sympathy when one observes how

<sup>27</sup> There are varying degrees to which the basic needs can be supplied, the Scandinavian countries at present realizing a more elaborate program than, e.g., the United States, which is a result of (*inter alia*) political choices, but the basic structure is similar.

<sup>28</sup> There is no a priori limit here – animals could also be recipients – but for convenience's sake I'll limit the account to human beings.

<sup>29</sup> The demarcation between direct and indirect self-interest may be difficult or even impossible to find, but that is not a problem for the analysis which is proposed here.

someone one doesn't even know suffers as a result of his or her lack of means. Does this evince altruism? The etymology of 'sympathy' is helpful here. The word 'sympathy' is a compound of 'sun' ('together') and 'pathos' ('feeling' or 'suffering')<sup>30</sup>. If one takes this seriously, it is the suffering of oneself in observing the struggles of someone else that is at stake; the person in distress and the observer both suffer (albeit in different respects). This means that it is really one's own suffering one wants to alleviate. No 'good' deeds are involved<sup>31</sup>.

### 3.2. A Satanic Stance

If God is the propagator of 'good' and 'bad' and if His power is the decisive element (cf. subsection 2.2), a number of confronting questions are raised. Hobbes's stance is helpful in this regard. In his view, the reason to abstain from malicious acts is that these may have negative effects for oneself: "The institution of eternal punishment was before sin, and had regard to this only, that men might dread to commit sin for the time to come"<sup>32</sup>. 'Good' and 'bad' are interpreted as subjective<sup>33</sup> until the legislator creates an – artificial – standard<sup>34</sup>.

As Hobbes maintains that man only acts in his own interest<sup>35</sup>, it is not surprising that it is God's power which is decisive:

"The right of nature, whereby God reigneth over men, and punisheth those that break his Lawes, is to be derived not from his Creating them, as if he required obedience, as of Gratitude for his benefits; but from his Irresistible Power"<sup>36</sup>.

In subsections 2.1 and 3.1, the problems with the criterion which focuses on the content of the norm to which one is to adhere were brought to light. If the criterion (God's position as a legislator) also fails to display

<sup>30</sup> The phoneme /n/ has changed to /m/ through regressive assimilation.

<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, the motivation to sympathize with other beings in Hinduism (with both human beings and animals) is based on the fact that one thinks 'Ātman' (one's soul) is actually identical to 'Brahman' (the whole of things) so that the explanation can be used here, albeit in a somewhat intricate way, too.

<sup>32</sup> Th. Hobbes, *De Cive*, Ch. 4, § 9 (p. 80).

<sup>33</sup> Th. Hobbes, *De Cive*, Ch. 3, § 31 (p. 74); cf. *De Cive*, Ch. 12, § 1 (p. 146). Significantly, Hobbes also states: "[...] there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers." (*Leviathan*, Ch. 11 (p. 160)).

<sup>34</sup> Th. Hobbes, *De Cive*, Ch. 12, § 1 (p. 146); *Leviathan*, Ch. 29 (p. 365); cf. Ch. 46 (p. 697).

<sup>35</sup> "[...] of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some *Good to himselfe*." (Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 14 (p. 192)). I do not completely agree with Hobbes at this point as he seems to leave no room for the indirect self-interest I discerned (in my terminology, he reduces all motivation to direct self-interest), but that doesn't matter for the analysis of the current issue.

<sup>36</sup> Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 31 (p. 397) (cf. *De Cive*, Ch. 15, § 5 (p. 185)).

a moral element, why would it be moral to obey God? In fact, if the power criterion is determinative, one might argue that it would be incumbent on man, acting in his self-interest, to obey Satan, if he should prove to be more powerful than God. Just to be clear, this is not what I myself propose. After all, if the Christian doctrine is correct, God is more powerful than Satan (cf., e.g., Job 1:12, Revelation 12:8-9); and if it is not, I am not inclined to such a course of action on the basis of any conviction. In fact, with regard to the question whether God (or Satan, for that matter) exists, I must suspend my judgment as I have no means to establish His existence or non-existence. It may be objected that such a conviction *is* present in some who on that basis still find a reason to act in accordance with God's dictates; they are presumed to simply grasp that it is good (or bad) to do something and to find a directive on that basis. I will try to counter such an objection in section 4.

#### 4. Meta-ethical considerations

In order to attempt to unnerve the results reached in the foregoing, one might try to appeal to 'good' and 'bad' (or 'evil'). Don't the issues mentioned attest to these notions? Isn't it, e.g., simply good to give to the poor? From an ethical point of view, this may indeed be argued. At that level, the pivotal question is: *what is good?*; one seeks to do good things. The meta-ethical question, and that is the one at stake here, is: *'what is 'good'?*' The meaning (if any) of the ethical notions is concerned.

One may adduce that it is not because of the agreeable results that one acts but, conversely, that rewards are sought because they are considered good<sup>37</sup>. In a similar vein, it may be stated that

"it is necessary for evil men to be unhappier when they have accomplished what they longed for than if they might be unable to implement the things they long for." ("[...] infeliciores esse necesse est malos cum cupita perfecerint, quam si ea quae cupiunt implere non possint")<sup>38</sup>.

Augustine indicates that happiness is only attainable for those who do not seek after evil<sup>39</sup>.

The problem in these accounts is that they presuppose the existence of good and evil; it isn't clarified how this may be maintained and what it means. If these notions can't be maintained for that reason, does that also mean that the difference between doing something out of selfish motives and for a moral reason is cancelled, reducing the latter to the former? Abelard makes the following distinctions:

<sup>37</sup> Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 4, 3, 7 (p. 109).

<sup>38</sup> Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 4, 4, 3 (p. 113).

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 13, 6, 9 (pp. 286/287, 288/289).

"[...] repentance at one time happens out of love for God and is fruitful, at another because of some penalty with which we do not want to be burdened [...]"<sup>40</sup>; "Daily [...] we see many about to depart from this life repenting of their shameful accomplishments and groaning with great compunction, not so much out of love of God whom they have offended or out of hatred of the sin which they have committed as out of fear of the punishment into which they are afraid of being hurled"<sup>41</sup>.

Assuming one acts out of love of God, if one does, it is not the direct self-interest which is concerned (as would be the case if one were to act to avoid punishment), but the indirect self-interest (cf. subsection 3.1). One simply prefers acting out of love of God to sinning. Of course, it may be objected that one has faith without being able to know (through reason) whether one will be rewarded or punished. Doesn't this evince the righteousness of the believer? Firstly, if this is his position, his faith is blind; he has no ground to believe in anything rather than in anything else and any conviction (if one may call it that) he has is random. The religion to which he adheres is interchangeable for another, precisely because of the fact that he has no reason to cling to one rather than to another<sup>42</sup>. Secondly, this course of action doesn't appear to differ from insuring one's possessions (not knowing whether something may happen to them), where paying the premium is similar to performing the 'good' deeds. By contrast, if one *is* able to know whether a reward or punishment will ensue, the major premise of the objection is cancelled.

The objection that one acts from an insight into what is 'good' and 'bad' can still be proposed. One acts in accordance with the Ten Commandments, e.g., because one acknowledges their value. I can't prove that those who have an intuition of this sort are wrong. It is, however, doubtful whether their position is tenable. Is there such a thing as an intrinsic good quality? The Bible isn't helpful here. In the statement that "The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble [...]" (Nahum 1:7), is 'a strong hold in the day of trouble' the reason why He is good? If so, the positive effects of His actions are simply posited and 'good' should be understood as 'agreeable' or 'useful'. If not, no reason for His goodness is given.

Leaving the Bible aside, it is difficult in general, having analyzed the elements involved in actions, to find 'goodness', especially if one considers accounts such as Mackie's argument from queerness, indicating that it is hard to see how moral qualities would fit with the things with which one is acquainted<sup>43</sup>. It is, then, up to those who appeal to intuitions, to inquire whether these really pertain to 'good' and 'bad' elements or whether they may be reduced to other elements than these.

<sup>40</sup> P. Abelard, *Ethics*, p. 76/77.

<sup>41</sup> P. Abelard, *Ethics*, p. 78/79.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, this is my position. This is the reason why I suspend judgment with regard to the issue which religion is the right one (if any) and consider myself an agnostic.

<sup>43</sup> J. Mackie, *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 38-42.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to ascertain whether moral elements may be present in religion, having focused on the Christian faith. A number of results were reached which may be perceived by some as radical. It was my intention to inquire as critically as possible, not eschewing any conclusion a priori. Still, the outcome doesn't necessarily lead to far-reaching practical changes. In particular, no reasons not to adhere to Christianity (or any other religion) were brought to the fore. By contrast, I have concentrated on the specific motivation to do so. This culminated in two perspectives.

If one is to act on account of an acknowledgment of the (inherent) goodness or wickedness of some things, it is important to find out whether such qualities may be said to exist at all. The reason frequently given in the Bible (a reward or punishment which is to follow) merely points to a selfish perspective and discounts an alternative explanation.

The same analysis can be applied to the situation in which God's power is the central issue. Selfishness may be advanced in general as the basic drive to act. A meta-ethical inquiry also poses some difficult questions (not only to religions, but to a number of philosophies as well) which can't be ignored. This is not necessarily detrimental to the position of religions; it does mean that some of the doctrines pertaining to reasons for adhering to them may be up for critical revision. Still, it will mean that the followers of religions will be able to maintain them in a world in which their tenets are ever more critically questioned.

## Literature

- P. Abelard, *Ethics* (Scito Te Ipsum). Translated by D. Luscombe. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971 [± 1140]
- Anselm, *De Conceptu Virginali et De Originali Peccato*. Complete works, vol. 2. Rome: F. S. Schmitt, 1940 [± 1100]
- Th. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. Complete Works, vol. 7: 1a2ae Summae Theologiae a quaestione 71 ad quaestionem 114. Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1892 [1265–1274]
- Augustine, *De Natura Boni*. Œuvres de Saint Augustin, vol. 1. Edited by B. Roland-Gosselin. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949 [± 405]
- Augustine, *De Trinitate*, part 2. Œuvres de Saint Augustin, vol. 16. Edited by P. Agaësse. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1955 [± 417]
- G. Biel, *Collectorium circa Quattuor Libros Sententiarum*, Book 3. Tübingen: J. Mohr, 1979 [± 1440]
- Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Munich/Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2000 [± 525]
- Bonaventura, *Breviloquium*. Complete Works, vol. 5. Florence: Ad Claras Aquas, 1891 [± 1257]
- R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979

- P. Damiani, *De Divina Omnipotentia*. Edited by A. Cantin. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1972 [± 1067]
- R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Meditationes de Prima Philosophia). The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 2. Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1641]
- Th. Hobbes, *De Cive* (the English version). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983 [1651]
- Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 [1651]
- S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Frygt og Bæven). Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 6. Translated by H. Hong and E. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983 [1843]
- G. Leibniz, *Discours de Métaphysique*. Complete Writings and Letters: Philosophical Writings, vol. 4, part B. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999 [1686]
- J. Mackie, Ethics. *Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth et al.: Penguin, 1978
- J. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982
- Plato, *Euthyphro*. Complete Works, vol. 1. Translated by M. Croiset. Paris: Les belles lettres, 1959 [± 386 BCE]
- B. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Complete Works, vol. 3. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925 [1670]

## ABSTRACT

In this article, it is inquired which reasons are decisive for acting in accordance with divine commands, and whether these can be regarded as moral reasons; the emphasis lies on Christianity. To this effect, the position of God as a – basic – lawgiver is expounded, with special attention to the role His power plays. By means of an account of the grounds given (in the Bible) to obey God, the selfish motives in this respect are brought to light. It is questioned whether any other elements can be discerned, particularly from a meta-ethical perspective.